BULLETIN

of the

Connecticut Historical Society

Volume 10 *Hartford, January, 1944* *Number 2*

Photograph courtesy of Arrow Commercial Photo Service.

A Two-Drawer Sunflower Chest 1670-1700
(before restoration)

Some Notes on Sunflower Chests

These notes are not the fixed opinions of one who assumes to be in any sense an expert on American antique furniture, but are merely the thoughts of one who has long admired the sunflower pieces and feels that they are the handsomest product of the early New England joiner.

His interest has led him to gather such information as he could regarding them and from this information certain theories have formed in his mind, which are here set down. These theories have raised questions and possible answers to them. He hopes that they will provoke discussion and possibly reveal further information on the subject.

Let us start by limiting our thoughts to those chests which have on them the so-called sunflower on the center panel. In England this motif is usually called the aster, which is probably a more correct description, for the flower lacks the large center of the true sunflower. Most, though not all, have the additional feature of turned, applied ornaments of identical design. The Connecticut Historical Society has two of these chests,—one of the common type and one without the turned ornaments but with the front covered with design similar to a Hadley chest. Certain punch marks, added to the carving for ornament, but not part of the design, would indicate that both chests were the work of the same man. These punch marks appear on many but not all chests.

We will include not only the chests but also the press or court cupboards which have the same basic ornamentation.

Of these sunflower pieces there are eight press cupboards known and possibly sixty chests. We say possibly because many of the chests in the list used have not been seen and it is probable that several are not of the sunflower type. One press cupboard, shown in a magazine article about them, is omitted because the ornamentation is executed in a manner distinctly different from those which we will discuss.

If these sixty-eight specimens have survived all of the hazards of two hundred and fifty years, is it not probable that there were originally nearly one hundred made? This number will be referred to later.

Our first question is, "Where were they made?"

Many who have written of them have called them Hartford chests. So far nothing has come to light which indicates Hartford origin or original ownership for a single one. Instead there seems to be fairly strong evidence pointing to Wethersfield as the source of most, if not all, of them. Inquiries of all of the present owners who could be reached brought out tradition regarding the antecedents of seventeen. Of these, twelve, or almost twenty per cent of the known examples trace back to Wethersfield. The other five had vague traditions, none of them definite, and no two traced to the same town. As the traditions of many of the first group indicate a natural descent through the female members of the families owning them, the latter five might have easily traveled, as had several of the larger group, away from their native home through marriages. It would appear reasonable to assume that all had their start in Wethersfield, the town to which so many trace back.

In this connection we must remember that Wethersfield in those days, before 1700, included, in addition to the present town, the area now in Glastonbury, Newington, Rocky Hill and part of Berlin. The reports show the chests to have come from all of these sections except Rocky Hill. Four trace to Wethersfield proper, three to Glastonbury, three to Newington, one to Berlin and one to Farmington, just over the Newington line.

If we accept this theory that all were made in Wethersfield, we come to our second question, "How was it that there were so many handsome and similar pieces of furniture made in a primitive community, settled in a wilderness only a few decades before?"

If, as suggested before, there were about a hundred pieces made, there must have been one in almost every house. Our only answer to this is to refer you to a similar condition in Hadley, Massachusetts, of whose chests over one hundred survive. Hadley, interestingly enough, was settled from Wethersfield, and her chests, while different, have dimensions very close to the sunflower type, and other points which bring the two very close together.

Our next question is, "Who made them?"

Nothing has come to light which gives the slightest clue. No family tradition, no will or letter refers to the maker. Inventories show several men of the period who owned turning tools and who might have made the turned ornaments, and several who had joiners' tools, but there is nothing which ties any individual to our subject.

The Rowlandson cupboard indicates a fairly close date for one piece, for the Rev. Mr. Rowlandson was in Wethersfield for only two years, 1677-1678, before his death.

Many think that no one man could have made so many chests, for they represent a great amount of work when we consider that they were made entirely by hand, from the riving of the oak lumber to the finishing, but to the writer they all seem to come from one hand or at least one shop. Every craftsman leaves his trademark on his work, even if it is not signed, and it would be exceptional if two or more men could make such pieces and not show definite differences in their work.

The dimensions of various chests differ slightly, but only a very little. The proportions are all the same and the variation is easily accounted for by the need of using such material as was available. If the lumber for a rail or a post was a fraction of an inch undersize it was not discarded but the corresponding pieces were cut down to match. Lumber was too precious to be wasted.

In the Hadley chests, too, we seem to have a single maker turning out a considerable number of similar pieces, though there appear to have been several makers, each turning out a different type of chest.

Examining the carved panels we find the interesting fact that while all are similar, rarely, if ever, are two exactly alike. The designs were not traced from a fixed pattern but were made up from combinations of curves which could be produced from a limited number of gouges. The work is not carving in the true sense, for there is no attempt to model the figures. The design was outlined with the gouges and then the background was cut away, leaving a flat design in relief. Contrast was obtained by stippling the background with an easily made punch.

The turned ornaments, too, deserve attention. They are identical in design on all of the chests seen, and of a pattern not exactly copied elsewhere. They are the work of a master turner and their delicate outlines are a problem for the modern turner when he is called upon to supply a missing piece.

Dr. Lyon, in his notable book, states that none of the foreign

authorities who were consulted had ever seen this design. The writer was surprised, having read this, to note in the illustrations of a book on English oak furniture all of the elements of this design as well as all of the characteristics of these pieces, such as the moldings, both raised and depressed, and the turnings.

Listen to the following descriptions.

"The rails have the scratch-beads and hollows running through from side to side, with no attempt at mitring with the upright stiles, the upper doors have both mitred moldings and framings. The upright facing edges of the rails are chamfered in the usual manner. Plain cupboards of this type, with simple balusters, can usually be referred to the Welsh bordering counties, Somerset or even Northern Lancashire, but in the work of the latter county, fruit wood, principally cherry, was generally introduced as a relief to the oak, in split balusters or ornaments of a similar character."

"Another peculiarity; a conventional ornament neatly grounded out, but with no carving relief, much the same as flat applied fretwork."

These comments were not written about a sunflower cupboard or chest, as they might well have been, but are quotations from an English authority, referring to the oak furniture of the Welsh border, particularly Lancashire.

This leads me to my last assumption, that the sunflower pieces were the work of a joiner who had come to this country from Lancashire and in his new home reproduced from memory the pieces on which he had worked at home. No such emigrant can be identified.

My notes are ended with this thought. May they encourage speculation and criticism from others on the same subject.

ANONYMOUSLY CONTRIBUTED.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

At the October meeting Frances A. Hoxie was elected Recording Secretary, filling the vacancy caused by the resignation of Thompson R. Harlow. A talk on "Early Connecticut Churches" was given at the meeting by Mrs. Adolph F. Pauli, of Middletown. The speaker gave much information on the builders of our churches, with dates of erection and style of architecture. The talk was delightfully illustrated with lantern slides.

"A Yankee Paymaster with Commodore Farragut" was the title of a paper given at the November meeting by Stanley Burnham Weld, M.D., of Hartford. The reader based his paper on the diary of his grandfather, Aaron Davis Weld, of Winchester, Massachusetts, who left home in February, 1862, to act as Assistant Paymaster in the United States Navy. He was stationed aboard the steamer "J. P. Jackson" and died of a fever while on blockade duty in June, 1862.

Rev. Sherrod Soule, D.D., of West Hartford, read a paper at the December meeting entitled "H. Clay Trumbull, a Good Soldier of his Country and his Church". Dr. Soule stressed Trumbull's service in the Civil War as chaplain of the Tenth Connecticut Regiment and gave an account of his capture and confinement in Libby Prison.

Barkhamsted Church Records

(Continued from Vol. 10, page 8)

	Sept. 2—	Seth Rockwell son to John Rockwill and wife.
	Sept. 3—	Phebe Rockwell daughter of John Rockwell and wife.
	Sept. 5—	Electa Eells daughter of Ozias Eells and wife.
	Sept. 6—	Lidia Smith wife of Seth Smith and infant.
	Sept. 9—	Thomas Collens son of Nathaniel Collins and wife.
	Sept. 20—	Harvey Pike son to James Pike and wife.
	Oct. 12—	Joseph Shepard Jr. husband to Sarah Shepard.
	Oct. 23—	Jason Sperry son to Darius Sperry and wife.
	Oct. 30—	Lucy Allyn wife of Jonathan Allyn.
	Nov. 8—	Lucretia Messenger daughter of Elijah Messenger and wife.
	Nov. 20—	Polly Shepard daughter of Moses Shepard and wife.
	Dec. 12—	Elam Huff son to Caleb Huff and wife.
1794	Feb. 16—	Widow Martha Barber mother to David and Ephrain Barber aged 92.
	Mar. 1—	Rachel Holcomb daughter to Eli Holcomb and wife.
	Apr. 15—	Thomas Collins son of Nathaniel Collins and wife.
	May 18—	——Richards a boy that lived with Jonas Elwells wife.
	Aug. 14—	Hannah Frazier wife of John Frazier.
	Sept. 2—	Sarah Willy wife of Clement B. Willy.
	Sept. 27—	Dorcas Cornwell daughter of Isaac Cornwell and wife.
	Oct. 12—	Hiram Willcon son of Jehiel Willcon and wife.
	Oct. 17—	Clara Merrels daughter of John Merrels and wife.
	Nov. 13—	Ferdinand Smith son of Ferdinand Smith and wife.
	Nov.—	Jacklin a negro.
1795	Feb. 25—	Josiah Allyn daughter frozen to death in Mr. John Ives barn.
	Apr. 10—	A child of Abner Messenger and wife.
	July 16—	Candis Ford wife to Cephas Ford.
	Oct. 16—	Mrs. Wetmore wife of Evereati Wetmore.
	Oct. 19—	Rana Johnson daughter of Sherborn Johnson.
	May —	A child of Nathaniel Collins and wife.
	Oct. 21—	Widow Anna Austin died suddenly.
	Nov. 12—	Ely Case husband to Mrs. Case.
	———	A child of Jared Roxford and wife.
	———19—	Reuben Johnson husband to Bethiah Johnson.
	Dec. 10—	Mrs. Taylor wife of Abner Taylor Jr.

	——19—	A child of Josiah Bronson which he had by Cloe Allyn.
	——30—	Hiram Johnson son to widow Bethiah Johnson.
1796	Mar. 26.—	An infant child of Luther McNall and wife.
	Apr. 5—	Alfred Chub son to Alexander Chub and wife.
	Apr. 20 —	Rachel wife of Jared Roxford.
	June 26—	Rhoda wife of Major Israel Jones died.
	Aug. 11—	Elsa daughter of Abner Messenger and wife.
	Oct. 14—	Joseph Shepard husband to Mrs. Shepard.
	Dec. 8—	A child of Daniel Hitchcock and wife.
1797	Mar. 3—	Deborah Cook wife of Mr. Nathaniel Cook, moved from Granville died in a fit age 58.
	Mar. 8—	Died an infant of Ebenezer Taylor and wife.
	Mar. 11—	Died an infant of Sabad Case and wife.
	Apr. 29—	Widow Mary Case mother to Josiah, Andrew, Ozias and Oliver Case died aged 77 yrs.
	June 18—	Lily Peet wife to Anthony Peet a negro.
	Nov. 14—	Mrs. Pike wife to Samuel Pike died age 74.
1798	Feb. 6—	Roxanna Goodhue daughter of David Goodhue in the 13 year of her age.
	Mar. 29—	Amos Case husband to Elizabeth Case age 42.
	May 24—	Richard Adams Jr. died of consumption aged.
	Aug. 15—	Amos Jones son to Benjamin Jones and wife age 12 years.
	Sept. 26—	Orville Jones son to Benjamine Jones and wife age 10 year.
	Oct. 2—	Benoni Jones husband to Elizabeth Jones died.
	Oct. 10—	A child of Alesander Chubs of fits.
	Apr.—	A child of Nathaniel Collins and wife of fits.
	Oct. 15—	Anna Tiffany daughter of Ephrain Tiffany and wife aged 11.
	Dec. 6—	Rollin son to Amos Beacher and wife 2 yrs. 3 mos.
	Dec. 31—	Phene a negro woman of Mr Richardson died age 100 years.
1799	Jan. 10—	Daniel Resford father to the widow Allyn and widow Sarah Roxford died in 88th year.
	—22—	Capt. Solomon Newell husband to Demari Newell in 47th year.
	Feb. 26—	Seth Leanard husband to Mrs. Leanard age 54.
	Mar. 23—	Ira Gregory son to Joseph Gregory 7 years old.
	Apr. 17—	Chester Chubb son to Alexander Chubb 2 years old.
	Apr. 20—	Rhena Case daughter to Ezra Case and wife 13 years.
	May——	A child of Amos Case and wife still born.
	June 27—	A child of Ezra Rockwell and wife at birth.
	Oct. 3—	Ira Hart son to Aaron Hart and wife.
	Nov. 12—	The widow Merrit mother to John Merrit and brothers aged 88 died of old age.

1800	Feb. 4—	Mehitabel Case daughter of Ezra Case and wife 19th year of her age.
	Mar 19—	Two infant children of Ebenezer Taylor and wife still born.
	Mar. 29—	Mrs. Hannah Tuttle wife of Isaiah Tuttle and an infant still born.
	May 10—	A child 7 weeks old of David Bristol Jr. and wife.
	May 14—	Charles Tuttle husband to ——— Tuttle hung himself on a tree.
1801	Feb. 3—	Wife of Ebenezer Taylor.
	———	Aged Mr. Fox who lived with Mr. John Frazer.
	May 27—	An infant child of Eliphlet Howd and wife still born.
	——29—	Joel Allyn husband to Mrs Thankful Allyn.
	Oct. 4—	William Hart son to Hiel Hart and wife.
	Oct. 6—	Atwater Parker son to Joel Parker and wife.
		One child of Alpha Gains.
1802	Mar. 9—	Azuba Wilcox daughter to Capt. Jehiel Wilcox and his wife.
	June 2—	Nelson Upson son to Mr. Saul Upson.
	Sept. 8—	Hiram Wilcox son to Norman Wilcox and his wife.
1803	Aug. 13—	A child of Harris Emmons and wife.
	16—	Samuel Church son of Samuel Church and his wife.
	Sept. 5—	Sally Rose daughter of Daniel Rose and wife.
	12—	Anson Preston son of Charles Preston and wife.
		Alanson Frazer son of John Frazer and wife.
	Oct. 8—	Charles Preston husband to Mrs. Lucy Preston.
		A child daughter of Mr. Wilcox and wife.
	Oct. 20—	A child of Mr. Zimri Barber and wife.
	Dec. 12—	A child of James Miller and wife.
1804	Jan. 9—	Lovisa Emmons daughter of Harris Emmons.
	Feb. 5—	Rhoda Howd wife of Salmon Howd.
	Apr. 8—	Sarah Beach wife of David Beach.
	Apr. 18—	Lemon Andrews husband to Mrs. Andrews.
	July 17—	Jonathan King husband to Mrs. Bethiah.
	22—	Ruth Hungerford wife to James Hungerford.
	Aug. 4—	Eunice Fancher daughter of Aaron Ludington and wife.
	Nov. 12—	George Taylor son to William Taylor and wife.
	27—	The aged Mrs. Fox.
1805	Mar. 13—	An infant child of Israel Jones Esq.
	16—	Harry Hill son of Hawkins Hart's wife before she married him drownded.
	Apr. 24—	Teta (Silas) Harrison a man but a few days before moved into this town.
	May 4—	Sibil Munson wife of Medad Munson.

	Nov. 9—	An infant son of Samuel Merrit Jr. and wife being twins.
1806	Apr. 5—	An infant of Edar Taylor and wife.
	May ——	An infant of Luther and his wife.
	Sept 16—	Mr. Pelatiah Ransom's mother—91 years.
	25—	The aged Mrs. Ward mother to widow Case aged 95.
	27—	Laura Candici Phelps daughter Naaman Phelps and his wife.
	28—	Riley Hill son of Jedidiah Hill and his wife.
	Oct. ——	Silvester Kilby son of Asher Kilby and his wife. Also a daughter of Jedidiah Hill, and a son of Naamon Phelps and his wife.
1807	Feb. 9—	Deacon Benjamin Parker husband to Mrs. Marey Parker in the 78th year.
	Feb. 28—	A child of Deborah—daughter of Mr John Mack.
	May 11—	Mrs. Abigail Hart consort of Mr. Hawkins Hart fit of numpalsey.
	May 28—	A child of Isaac Barber and wife.
	Sept. 11—	Anna Tiffany daughter of Joel Tiffany and wife.
	17—	Patty Gaines daughter of Moses Gains and wife.
	20—	Sally Hart and on the 22nd.
	22—	Hannah Gains Hart children of Levi Hart and his wife.
	28—	Laura Wilcox daughter of Norman Wilcox and wife.
	Oct. 4—	Encrease Whitmore husband to Mrs. Whitmore aged 84.
	Dec. 2—	Widow Elizabeth Shepard aged 84.
1808	Mar. 28—	An infant child of Jese Hart and wife.
	Apr. 14—	John Hutson husband of Mrs. Hutson aged 84.
	Apr. 16—	John Perry husband to Mrs. Perry.
	May 27—	Phebe Merrils daughter of Dan Merrils and wife.
	June 11—	A child of Naomi Merrit.
	14—	Two infant children of Draten Jones and wife.
	July—	The wife of Cyrus Case.
	Aug. 22—	Experience Slade wife of Jacob or James Slade 80.
1809	Jan. 11—	William Newell son of Lot Newell and wife.
	Mar. 6—	Mrs. Barber wife of Jacob Barber.
	Apr. 23—	Mrs. Hutson relict of Mr. John Hutson aged 84.
	May 5	Richard Adams consort to Mrs. Adams.

(To be continued)

The price of these Bulletins is ten cents each.